Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*  

**Introduction**

[...]

2: ‘about this translation’

[...] Sprung from an Irish nationalist background and educated at a Northern Irish Catholic school, I had learned the Irish language and lived within a cultural and ideological frame that [xxiii] regarded it as the language that I should by rights have been speaking but I had been robbed of. [...] I tended to conceive of English and Irish as adversarial tongues, as either/or conditions rather than both/and, and this was an attitude that for a long time hampered the development of a more confident and creative way of dealing with the whole vexed question - the question, that is, of the relationship between nationality, language, history and literary tradition in Ireland.

[...]

It is one thing to find lexical meanings for the words and to have some feel for how the metre might go, but it is quite another thing to find the tuning fork that will give you the note and pitch for the overall music of the work. Without some melody sensed or promised, it is simply impossible for a poet to establish the translator’s right of way into and through a text. I was therefore lucky to hear this enabling note almost straight away, a familiar local voice, one that had belonged to relatives of my father, people whom I had once described (punning on their surname) as “big-voiced Scullions”.

I called them “big-voiced” because when the men of the family spoke, the words they uttered came across with a weighty distinctness, phonetic units as separate and defined as delph platters displayed on a dresser shelf. A simple sentence such as “We cut the corn today” took on immense dignity when one of the Scullions spoke it. They had a kind of Native American solemnity of utterance, as if they were announcing verdicts rather than making small talk. And when I came to ask myself how I wanted *Beowulf* to sound in my version, I realized I wanted it to be speakable by one of those relatives. I therefore tried to frame the famous opening lines in cadences that would have suited their voices, but that still echoed with the sound and sense of the Anglo-Saxon.

\[Hwaet we Gar-Dena in gear-dagum\]
\[peod-cyninga prym gefrunon\]
\[hu da aepelingas ellenfremedon.\]

[So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness. We ahve heard of those princes’ heroi campaigns.]

[...] I came to the task of translating *Beowulf* with a prejudice in favour of forthright delivery. I remembered the voice of the poem as being attractively direct, even though the diction was ornate and the narrative method at times oblique. What I had always loved was a kind of foursquareness about the utterance, a feeling of living inside a constantly indicative mood, in the presence of an understanding that assumes you share an awareness of the perilous nature of life and are yet capable of seeing it steadily and, when necessary, sternly. There is an undeluded quality about the Beowulf poet’s sense of the world that gives his lines immense emotional credibility and allows [xxvii] him to make general observations about life that are far too grounded in experience and reticence to be called “moralizing”. These so-called “gnomic” parts of the poem have the cadence and force of earned wisdom, and their combination of cogency and verity was again something that I could remember form the speech I heard as a youngster in the Scullion kitchen.’ (pp.xxvii-ix.)